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ETHNICITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY  
ON THE NORTHEAST TIBETAN PLATEAU:  
SANCHUAN'S WEATHER MANAGEMENT RITUALS  
IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION: ETHNICITY AND CULTURE BEYOND BARTH'S  
BOUNDARIES

What is the relationship between ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity? This paper is part of a broader project to investigate this question in the context of a region of supposed ethno-cultural rupture – the Sino-Tibetan Frontier. My investigations of ethnicity, culture, and language in this region (Roche 2011, 2014, 2015, Roche and Leag mo tshe ring 2013, Roche and Stuart 2015) have focused on a population referred to as the Monguor or Tu. My work also aims to contribute to broader trends in the study of Tibet and ethnic minorities in China that look at the complex relations between ethnicity and diversity (Jinba Tenzin 2013, Chao 2012, Merriam 2012, Hayes 2014).

My research has been inspired by Barth's (1969) critique of the 'Herderian trinity' of community, culture, and identity (Wimmer 2013). In contrast to the Romantic notion of bounded communities professing a common identity based on shared culture, Barth suggested that the landscape of cultural difference is frequently divided arbitrarily, with ethnic boundaries often placed between culturally similar groups. He therefore advises placing emphasis on boundary marking and maintenance over the 'cultural stuff contained within ethnic bounds. Within this 'boundary paradigm', "Researchers would no longer study 'the culture' of ethnic group A or B, but rather how the ethnic boundary between A and B was inscribed onto a landscape of continuous cultural transitions" (Wimmer 2013:22-23).

Although this 'boundary paradigm' is widely accepted today –

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to the extent that some have even interpreted it as a 'denunciation of ethnicity' (May 2013) – there are still good reasons to continue extending Barth's critique. One is that the Romantic, Herderian notion coupling ethnicity and culture is, in many arenas, alive and well. Most prominently, perhaps, this notion lives on in theories of multiculturalism, which assume that "each ethnic group is endowed with a unique universe of norms and cultural preferences" (Wimmer 2013:19). In this framework, the role of the multiculturalist state is to ensure that these culturally distinct ethnic groups are publically recognized and their right to be 'equal but different' is protected (Eriksen 2010). This persistence of 'Herderian common sense' in multiculturalist ideology is suggestive of the need to continue extending Barth's critique of the relationship between ethnicity and culture.

A second reason why it is important to continue extending Barth's critique is that in decoupling ethnic groups from culture, Barth's 'boundary paradigm' provides no alternative framework for thinking about patterns of cultural diversity beyond ethnic boundaries. Does this suggest that patterns of cultural diversity are completely un-structured? To fill the gap left by Barth's removal of ethnic boundaries, Wimmer (2013) offers a list of potential strategies for 'de-ethnicizing' discussions of diversity, suggesting that it can be analyzed along individual, local, class, and institutional lines. However, rather than using any of these strategies, I attempt to explain patterns of cultural diversity by using Barth's (1993) concept of 'traditions of knowledge' – the "great cultural streams" that contain "a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world" that are "instantiated and communicated in one or several media" and "distributed, communicated, employed, and transmitted within a series of instituted social relations" (Barth 2002:3). More than a mere bundle of ideas, therefore, traditions of knowledge also extend to "social organizations, political structures, cosmologies, and moralities" (Barth 2007:15). They are venues where ideas are reproduced and created (Barth 2007) according to the traditions' own "particular structures of conventions, social organizations, and criteria of validity" (Barth 1995:67). In his study of Bali, for example, Barth (1993) looks at Balinese Hinduism, royal cosmology,

modernity, and sorcery as traditions of knowledge that constitute and produce the diversity of the region.

In this article, my exploration of traditions of knowledge and my discussion of the relationship between culture and ethnicity focus on weather management rituals – specifically, rain-beckoning and drought-breaking practices – in the Sanchuan region on the northeast Tibetan Plateau. I give significant space to providing detailed accounts of the ritual process offered by local consultants. Following this, by recourse to the secondary literature, I attempt to situate these practices within the framework of traditions of knowledge in the broader region: North China and Inner Asia. In doing so, I explore how cultural diversity in the region is patterned. Is Barth's disentangling of ethnicity and culture warranted in this case? Is diversity more accurately framed by traditions of knowledge? What other factors shape the region's cultural diversity? My answers to these questions will hopefully contribute to broader understandings of cultural diversity and its patterning, and also to practical questions of how diversity is managed, whether by state, international, or local agents. My discussion begins with an introduction to the local context: the Sanchuan region, and local practices of water and weather management.

## WEATHER MANAGEMENT IN SANCHUAN

The Sanchuan region lies at the edge of the northeastern Tibetan Plateau, and consists of a broad, flat basin on the northern bank of the Yellow River, as well as several valleys extending through the mountainous hinterlands that form an arc around the basin. The main inhabitants of the region typically call themselves Mangghuer but are classified by China's government as belonging to the Tu *minzu*. Most Mangghuer live in villages named after the surname of their founder, subsist by agro-pastoralism, and speak a Mongolic language that is heavily influenced by both Tibetan and Chinese (Slater 2003). The population was traditionally divided between those living in the fertile, prosperous lowlands (*chuan*) and those eking a living in the hard hinterlands (*shan*) of the basin. The earliest description of Sanchuan and the Mangghuer in a western language

comes from Potanin (1893), and Stuart and his various co-authors have also made a significant contribution to the literature on the region,<sup>2</sup> while my own work has dealt with various aspects of the history and culture of Sanchuan, particularly ritual.<sup>3</sup>

Until modern irrigation projects began to be implemented in Sanchuan in the 1950s, the management of water was a major concern for all residents. Those in lowland valley areas of the basin could draw irrigation water from springs and streams, but even then, water was a limited resource that had to be carefully managed. In the mountainous hinterlands, water was even scarcer and its supply less reliable – crops depended solely on rainfall. For villagers in both the valleys and the hinterlands, the consequence of too little or too much water could be catastrophic. If there was too little water at the appropriate time, seeds could not be planted, or crops failed to sprout, or they did not grow enough, or they withered and died. In any of these cases, starvation beckoned. On the other hand, if too much rain fell early in the season, seeds or seedlings were washed away, or if hail fell before the harvest, the year's crop was ruined, and again, starvation loomed. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the management of weather and water was a central aspect of local life.

A number of secular and religious institutions dealt with water and weather in one way or another. Perhaps the most pervasive of these was the role of *paitou*, an elected village council of men whose duties included the management of irrigation water for their community:<sup>4</sup>

Before liberation, *paitou* had many things to do. They protected fields from livestock, and fined villagers if their livestock ate someone's crops. They stopped people from transporting illegal lumber. Here in Baojia Village, they managed the water that came from the valley behind the village. If the water broke the

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<sup>2</sup> Bao 1991, Chen et al. 2005, Hu and Stuart 1992a, 1992b, Stuart and Limusishiden 1994, Qi et al. 1999, Stuart and Hu 1991, 1992, 1993, Wang and Stuart 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, Zhu and Stuart 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, Zhu et al 1997, Zhu et al. 1994-5.

<sup>3</sup> Roche 2011, Roche 2014, 2015, Roche and Wen 2013, Roche and Stuart 2015.

<sup>4</sup> All oral accounts are provided anonymously. See below for information on the consultants who provided these accounts.

banks of the channel, they had to fix that immediately, because at that time, water was very scarce. *Paitou* could get more water than other people, but being a *paitou* was also a heavy burden. In the fourth lunar month, each *paitou* could get one day and one night's water. People in Baojia Shawar Village weren't allotted any water from the irrigation channel, so they had to buy water from the *paitou*. Most people didn't have money then, so the *paitou* accepted oil to light lamps in the temple.

*Paitou* were also responsible for protecting crops from storms, as observed by Potanin (2015:171) during his visit to Sanchuan in 1884/5. Here, he uses an alternative name for *paitou* – *turaoqi*:

The principal obligation of *turaoqi* is to conduct ritual at times of thunder. The elders among the *turaoqi* take sticks and start knocking them together immediately after the onset of a thunderstorm. All *turaoqi* run into the public temple upon hearing this, grasp drums, gongs, and *luo* and beat them. At the same time they keep in their hands flags and shout: "Qiliao! San liao! It is over, they have dispersed." Irrespective of how severely they might be soaked by the rain, and however strong hailstones might be hitting their heads, they must continue their ceremony under the open sky. The *turaoqi* wear on their heads winter hats made of felt to protect themselves from being hit by hailstones.

The *turaoqi* go from the temple to the closest crossroads if the thunder does not calm down, and if even this does not work, they go to a hillock or elevation on which a *chapai* has been set up in the spring by the same *turaoqi*. More male leaders from the village join the ritual if the storm still does not retreat. This ritual procession with drums is called *nuoqir kharerjiang* ('guarding against thunder'). Every *turaoqi* is obliged to participate in it without fail. A *turaoqi* is fined 100 cash if he comes too late to the crossroads and 400 cash if he comes too late to the hillock. Therefore, if a *turaoqi* has business away from home, he appoints a neighbor to be his deputy during his absence. They buy liquor from the money received from the fines.

Potanin (2015:171) also describes another important duty of the *paitou* – erecting storm prevention effigies, called *chapai*, to protect village crops:

The term *chapai* denotes a four-pointed wooden cross that is erected at some elevated location close to the fields. A human face is carved at the upper end of the vertical beam of the cross. The ends of the horizontal beam count as hands. The height of these crosses corresponds to the height of a man. The peasants under the guidance of the *turaoqi* set them up in the fourth month. ... The *turaoqi* slaughter a goat during the erection of the *chapai*. Its meat is cooked and eaten, while the skin is stuffed with straw and the stuffed animal is then tied to the cross in such a way that its head comes below the depiction of a human face on the cross. The goat's head must face the north. They drive a tablet called *shazhuang* into the ground, with Chinese characters at the root of the cross. Another tablet is attached to the intersection of the cross. I was told that they place four such crosses on one hillock; one is placed facing north, the other south, the third west, and the fourth east. I was unable to observe them myself for they are burnt in autumn, and on both occasions I arrived in Sanchuan only after the *chapai* had been removed from the fields. Their complete name is *khura wujiku chapai* or 'rain-watching *chapai*'. The peasants bake loaves of three different sizes and ten of each size during the erection of the *chapai*. The loaves baked in Sangbura differ from all others by their large size and are called *zhengbing*. According to the peasants, the *chapai* are erected in order to protect the fields from hailstorms.

In the villages of Wushi Valley, in northwest Sanchuan, the *paitou* undertake a unique ritual to ensure clement weather for their community. Each year, early in the fifth lunar month, the *paitou* ascend the high mountains above their village, and visit Niangniang Lake,<sup>5</sup> a chain of three small ponds with no visible inflow or outflow. Here, they sacrifice a sheep to the deity Niangniang Ye, and then boil and eat its meat. They conclude by performing a divination to ascertain if the deity has received their offerings and will grant them good weather in the coming year. During this ritual, the *paitou* are joined by two religious specialists who assist them, and who have an important role to play in weather-related rituals elsewhere in Sanchuan.

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<sup>5</sup> Also known as Suke Lake, probably from the Tibetan, Mtsho kha 'lakeside'.

Figure 1. The three sacred ponds of Niangniang Lake, 2011. All photos by Gerald Roche. Satellite imagery from Google Earth.



The first is a *lama*. In Sanchuan, the term *lama* is used to refer to all monks who practice Tibetan Buddhism. In the ritual at Nianniang Lake, the monk accompanies the *paitou* and chants while the *paitou* sacrifice, cook, and eat the sheep. None of the *paitou* know what the monk chants. Indeed, his presence seems to be a fairly superficial addition to the ritual. However, elsewhere in Sanchuan, as described below, monks take sole responsibility for performing weather management rituals.

Figure 2. A monk performs during the ritual at Niangniang Lake, 2011.



Another religious figure who is typically involved with the ritual at Niangniang Lake is the *huala*, a medium who embodies the community's patron deity (Stuart and Hu 1991, Roche and Wen 2013). Typically, the *huala* accompanies the *paitou* and the monk to the lake. He is possessed by the deity Niangniang Ye, and acknowledges the receipt of the *paitou*'s sacrifice to the deity. There are three *huala* in Wushi Valley, and about fifteen *huala* in all of Sanchuan, and it is typically the *huala* from Chuankor Village who accompanies the *paitou* to Niangniang Lake. More generally, *huala* play a central role in rain-beckoning and drought-breaking rituals, as the deities they incarnate are responsible for defending the community from destructive weather and providing them with clement weather that nurtures their crops.

Figure 3. A *huala* possessed, 2010.



Drought-breaking and rain-beckoning rituals are an important part of weather management in Sanchuan, but are performed only rarely. Rain-beckoning rituals may be performed once every twelve years according to the Chinese zodiac cycle (see Account One, below), but more typically, these rituals are only performed in extreme situations, when villagers feel that the lack of rain threatens their livelihoods. Normally, these rituals are

performed by villagers from the hinterlands who lack access to irrigation water from streams or springs, and who are solely reliant on rainwater. Rain-beckoning rituals usually involve a procession of villagers to a water source, often barefoot and wearing willow wreaths, where they obtain a symbolic sample of water, which they then transport back to the village, thus bringing rain. The efficacy of such rituals is typically thought to be due to the intercession of the community's patron deity. Drought-breaking rituals, on the other hand, seek to release water that is being contained by a malevolent being in a dam called a *nur* – a Mongolic term that has now lost, in the Mangghuer language, its broader meaning of 'lake'. The efficacy of drought-breaking rituals is thought to result from the defeat of the malevolent being by the community's patron deity, and the destruction, or pollution, of the *nur*. Drought-breaking rituals seem to have been far less common than rain-beckoning rituals.

Schram (2006) has previously discussed a variety of weather management rituals performed among the Mongghul, who, like the Mangghuer, are officially classified as Tu and are typically referred to as Monguor in English-language writing. He described a number of rituals performed by figures he calls shamans, as well as rituals performed by villagers themselves (presumably by figures similar to *paitou*), including the construction of *chapai*. The weather management practices he describes do not include any practices similar to the rain-beckoning or drought-breaking rituals described here.

Potanin (2015:172) provides the following brief description of a rain-beckoning ritual in Sanchuan:

During times of drought, the Sanchuan people make a visit to the temple of Shuilian Dong (close to Bingling Si) that is located on the left bank of the Yellow River downriver from Sangbura. The temple is built in a cave that contains a spring of cold fresh water. The water runs out of the rock and fills a basin. There is a small fist-sized protuberance in which there is a cavity like a drinking glass above the basin in the rock. This cavity is also always filled with water, and the water trickles from it into the basin. The walls and the ceiling of the cave are painted in fresco and a statue of the goddess Guanyin Pusa stands in front of the basin in a special case.

Sanchuan people place the statue of their local [deity] Longwang in a palanquin and carry it to Shuilian Dong when there is a long period without rain. The *turaoqi* also go with the procession. The participants carry with them a flask and a silk ribbon. The palanquin with the statue of Longwang is placed by the goddess Guanyin Pusa upon reaching Shuilian Dong Temple. The flask is then placed on the floor by the basin, and one end of the silk ribbon is tied to the flask and the other to the drinking-glass-shaped cavity in the rock from which water trickles. The litter with Longwang remains in the temple overnight.

According to tradition, Longwang once was a ferocious god, but was tamed by Guanyin Pusa and now is compelled to spend a night by her side in order to remind him of the lesson taught by the goddess whenever the god becomes reluctant to give water. The Sanchuan people think that Longwang is afraid of the goddess and will open the skies. The next morning, the people performing this ritual take the flask with the water that has been collected in it along with the ribbon, lift Longwang, return to Sanchuan, and wait for rain. The flask is once more taken to Shuilian Dong when it does rain, and the water in it is poured back into the basin.

Figure 4. Shulian Dong, 2011.



Although Potanin claims to be describing practices common throughout Sanchuan, the following accounts make clear that practices varied greatly, and what Potanin described was most likely specific to Qijia, the village from where he collected his information.

#### ACCOUNTS OF WEATHER MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN SANCHUAN

The following six accounts of rain-beckoning and drought-breaking rituals were collected from Mangghuer consultants in Sanchuan in the course of my PhD research (Roche 2011). Interviews were conducted by Wen Xiangcheng in Mangghuer and recorded in a variety of digital audio and video formats. I was present at all interviews, which were conducted in consultants' homes in Sanchuan on the basis of semi-structured interview guides that Wen and I developed together for each interview. We later replayed the interviews, and Wen verbally translated the content into English, while I transcribed them, seeking clarification as we went. Sections of interview transcriptions dealing with the focal rituals were later identified by key-word searches of the interview database, and then these excerpts, including Wen's questions and consultants' answers, were edited to produce the following accounts. Wen's questions were removed, and some changes were made to the transcribed texts to maintain flow and avoid repetition. Every attempt was made to preserve the original content and intent of the consultants' statements. Mangghuer terms have been transcribed using the pinyin system employed by Slater (2003) to represent local pronunciation, even for terms that are clearly derived from Chinese or Tibetan.

The first three accounts deal with rain-beckoning rituals. Accounts four and five deal with drought-breaking rituals, while the final account deals with both types of ritual. The last three accounts were provided by *huala* who participated in the ritual, while the first three accounts come from *paitou* who organized and participated in the rituals. The consultants who provided the accounts and quotes in this article were all male and in their forties or over. In order to ensure consultants' privacy, other than details provided in the accounts, no further identifying information is provided.

## Account One

We should go pray for water every Tiger Year, but the last time we went was about twenty years ago. To begin with, about ninety villagers gathered at our temple, and then we asked the *huala* to go into trance. We beat drums and gongs and then the *huala* went into trance and pierced his cheeks with a skewer. After that, we picked up Niangniang Ye's palanquin and left the temple. All the villagers wore hats made of willow branches and tied willow branches around their ankles. They wore the long robes we wear in Nadun,<sup>6</sup> and also carried flags; some villagers brought drums and gongs.

We set off for Juetan Temple,<sup>7</sup> across the Yellow River in Gansu Province. We stopped to rest, eat, and drink in several places: first in Khuaiter, then in Tiegong. Then we crossed the Yellow river in rafts made from boards laid over inflated sheepskins, and rested in Ghada Doro. Our next stops were in Erjia, and then Dat.

Just before we reached Juetan Temple, the villagers came out to welcome us, and our *huala* went into trance and pierced his cheeks with a skewer. When we reached Juetan Temple, he came out of trance and removed his skewer inside the temple. That temple must have some connection with Qutan Monastery in Ledu, because we sing a song that says: "Qutan Monastery is on the other side of the Yellow River from Juetan Temple."

We think that our Niangniang Ye originally came from Juetan Temple, so that is why we visit there. We put our palanquin in the temple with their Niangniang Ye, and our statue went on the left, because she was the guest. That night we stayed in the village: one or two people from Sangbura stayed in each house. The following morning, after eating breakfast at our hosts' homes, we went back to the Yellow River to pray for water.

We came to Malamanicha<sup>8</sup> on the way. We weren't expecting anything from them, but when we arrived, villagers

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<sup>6</sup> Nadun is an annual post-harvest festival held by communities throughout Sanchuan. See Roche (2011) and Stuart and Hu (1993).

<sup>7</sup> *Juetan si* used both to refer to a temple, and the village where the temple is located.

<sup>8</sup> Malamanicha literally means 'Ma lama's tea', but means 'to not get what one expects' in Mangghuer. On a past trip to get water from Juetan Temple, Sangbura villagers waited in this village, expecting to be received with food and drink, but no one appeared. After this incident, Sangbura villagers started to call the place Malamanicha and forgot its original name.

came out, greeted us with food and drink, and took us to a big, old, hollow elm tree. The villagers asked us to cut that tree down for them. They were afraid that a strong wind might blow the tree over on a house any day. But, they were also afraid their deities would punish them if they cut that tree down, but with our Niangniang Ye visiting they felt we would all be protected from disaster. So, we pushed that tree over and it fell down very easily.

Then we went to the Yellow River to get water. First, we put a long colorful string in a small copper bottle, and stopped the bottle up with a jujube. Then a Daoist tantrin<sup>9</sup> chanted Niangniang Ye's invocation scripture,<sup>10</sup> burned incense and votive papers, and we put the bottle in the water while an old man stood on the bank holding the other end of the string. Doing that is just like fishing with a fishing hook. Once the bottle was in the water we waited. We waited for more than an hour and then we pulled the bottle out to see if there was water in it or not. There was just one, very small drop of water in there, but that was enough, so we built a small fire, melted some candle wax, and sealed up the bottle.

After the bottle was sealed up, we returned to our village. The *huala* stayed in a trance all the way back, to protect the water. We visited Erjia in Gansu and Wangjiler in Sanchuan on the way back. But then, near the water pumping station in Nuojie, something strange happened: the deity Longwang Ye, from Nuojie Village, stole our water. Our *huala* sensed that, and started to move very energetically. He told us that the water had been stolen from our bottle, and that we needed to look for it. We searched all over the place for more than half an hour, before the *huala* discovered that Longwang Ye had hidden the water in a big tree. The *huala* threw his flail at the tree and a single drop of water fell from a leaf and onto a villager's face.

I don't remember if we put that water back in the bottle, but then we did return to our village and put Niangniang Ye back in her temple and the *huala* took out his skewer. I don't remember what we did with that bottle at the temple.

Then, it rained. It didn't rain much, but it did rain.

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<sup>9</sup> Locally called a *yinyang*.

<sup>10</sup> Invocation scriptures, locally referred to as *hao*, are described further in Roche and Wen (2013).

## Account Two

We used to go to Niangniang Lake in Gushan<sup>11</sup> to pray for water. Whenever we went, the *huala* pierced himself with three skewers: two in the cheeks and one in the tongue. Whenever the *huala* needed to eat during the ritual, the skewer in his tongue fell out by itself. But, I heard that many years ago, the *huala* could not take the skewer out of his tongue during the ritual, even when he ate.

When we went to pray for water, the *huala* pierced himself in our temple, and then, while we carried out the ritual for the next seven or eight days, the skewers were always in his cheeks. We needed seven or eight days because Niangniang Lake is so far from here. It took that long just to go there and come back.

When we went there, we offered a sheep to Niangniang Ye. We would choose the sheep several days before leaving for the lake. Then, we just let the sheep join the flock again, and on the day we left for the lake, the sheep would separate itself from the flock and follow us. We didn't need to drag it from the flock, it just followed us when we set out to Niangniang Lake. Whenever we took a break, the sheep also took a break, and when people started to walk, the sheep also started to walk again, and just followed them of its own volition. Then, at the lake, the sheep was dedicated to Niangniang Ye, and after the deity received the sheep,<sup>12</sup> we just left it there.

The last time we prayed for water, it was about seven or eight years ago (~2001). Usually, when we go to pray for water, we need a *huala* to help us, but if we don't have a *huala*, then the deity just possess someone from the village. When we go to pray for water, anyone can be a *huala*, and they will become possessed very easily.

Every time we went to pray for water, we went to the same places and stayed in the same places along the way. We didn't need to take any food with us, because local people would offer us food along the way. People in many villages prepared food for us. But, if it was not the right time to eat, then the *huala* would chase people and make them leave – even if the food was ready for them to eat, the *huala* wouldn't give them time to touch

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<sup>11</sup> Gushan Town in Minhe County, approximately fifty kilometers to the north of Sanchuan.

<sup>12</sup> Dedicating a sheep to the deity typically involved pouring water on its back; when the animal shook, this was taken as an indication that the deity had 'received' the animal.

the bowls.

During the ritual, ten of the twelve *paitou* had to pierce themselves with one skewer each. The *huala* pierced a skewer through their ear – he put it right through the hard part of the ear, not the earlobe. Although it looks terrible, they say it isn't very painful to pierce a skewer like that. After they were pierced, they had to keep the skewer in their ear for seven days. People say that after they came back after the seven days, the skewer would just fall out all by itself.

One of the villagers carried a bottle to get the water. He carried in on top of his head, using a special frame that we keep in the temple. The bottle is made from black china, and both the inside and outside are very smooth. It isn't like the usual china bottles that we can see everyday. Before we leave our temple, we seal the mouth of the bottle. We also place one end of a red thread inside the bottle, and the other end hangs outside the bottle.

On the way to the lake, people chant *mani*, and once they arrive at Niangniang Lake, they throw the bottle into the lake, while someone holds one end of the red thread. After a while, they pull out the bottle and make a hole in the seal with a heated skewer. Then, they push an incense stick through the hole to see if there is water in the bottle. If they can get as much water as the depth of the point on an incense stick, then it's perfect. If they get more water, then there will be too much rain, but if they cannot get any water, they throw the bottle into the water again. They have to get some water after three times. If they get too much water, then they have to throw the bottle into the lake again to return some of the water.

After we get water from the lake, we return the bottle to our temple, and we leave it there for three days. Then, we take the bottle to Miao'er Monastery and let monks chant over it, and this returns the water to Niangniang Ye.

It always rains after we do this ritual. Last time we did it, it snowed when we came back to the village, because we went to Niangniang Lake very early in the spring. At that time, it had been so dry that we couldn't sow our seeds. We went to pray for water, and then, in Manggghuer areas, it snowed. On the mountains it snowed, and in the valley floor it rained, but there was neither snow nor rain in Han places, even places that were very close by.

### Account Three

People from Niejie and Hawangjia always go to pray for water together. I heard that in the past, Shidieghuer people went to pray for water from Heavenly Lake, but later, they thought it was too far, so they went to pray for water from the spring in Xinjia Village, because that's where we used to return the water after we had prayed for water from Heavenly Lake. So, years ago, we decided to go pray for water down in the valley area. At that time, I was the temple keeper, and because my wife is from Wangjia Village, in the valley area, villagers here sent me to tell people in the valley that we were planning to come and pray for water.

So, first I went to Xinjia, but people there said, "Wangjia is where your village's ancestral temple is, so why don't you go there?" So, I went to Wangjia. But then, I found that in Wangjia, they had enclosed their spring in cement. That wouldn't work for us, since our *huala* needed to dance in the spring when we prayed for water. However, nobody in Wangjia was willing to undo all the work they'd just completed cementing over their spring. I went to ask their village leaders, and one of them said, "We just finished building our spring. It's impossible for us to destroy it now, just so you can get water. You shouldn't even consider coming to take water without bringing cigarettes and liquor for us as gifts." I answered, "The sky is raining fire, now is no time to talk about cigarettes and liquor!"

I remember, when I was very young, there was a wild spring there in Wangjia – nobody had built anything there. I saw a *huala* dance in that spring, and he sank into the mud up above his waist. The *huala* from Xinjia always danced in their spring when we went to pray for water. You see, whenever we go to pray for water, the local *huala* should dance *in* the spring, and our *huala* had to dance *around* the spring. People from our temple stood around the spring and got water while the Xinjia *huala* danced in the spring, and meanwhile, our *huala* danced outside the crowd of people. The other villagers had no chance to see anything. Sometimes we got water from Xinjia or Wangjia, but sometimes we got it from here. If we pray for water in Xinjia or Wangjia, we had to stay there for seven days.

Once, our *huala* went to earn money in Xiachuankou Village, near Chuankou Town (the capital of Minhe County). While he was there, people from Shidieghuer went to pray for water in the valley area. So, the *huala* ran all the way from Xiachuankou back to Guanting.<sup>13</sup> When our *huala* arrived in Guanting, we had

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<sup>13</sup> This is a distance of approximately ninety kilometers.

just arrived there from Shidieghuer on our way to Wangjia or Xinjia. When we arrived in Guanting, people there thought, "Mountain villagers are so stupid to pray for water – it never works." Nonetheless, people in Guanting offered us food. While we were eating, our *huala* arrived and started to beat villagers, and forced us to get up and leave. At that time, there were only a few small wispy clouds in the sky, but within ten minutes of us having left there, a storm arrived. We couldn't continue in all that rain, and so we took a break in Hulijia.

Every time people from Shidieghuer go to pray for water, the Muslims in Damajia Village start fertilizing their fields, because they know it is going to rain. As far as I recall, it has rained every time after we've gone to pray for water, but I don't think that's because of the deity's power. You see, every time we go to pray for water, it is after a long drought, and after a long drought it *has* to rain, even if we don't go to pray for water.

The last time we went to pray for water, the people in the valley area asked me to show the process to young people. They said that after old people died, young people wouldn't know how to pray for water any more. But, even I don't know all the processes; many old people died and we lost the songs we should sing when we pray for water. So, the last time, some old people sang some songs by themselves, but those songs were not really traditional songs.

It is very expensive to pray for water, because we need to slaughter a sheep, among other things.

Xinjia people always choose the time when we should go pray for water. When they want us to come, they send some people to the top of this mountain behind their village, and then they stick a flag in the ground on top of the mountain, and then they beat a gong. After that, they leave. When people in Lajia hear the sound of the gong, they send someone to the mountain between Lajia and Xinjia, and they bring the flag back to the village temple. Then, that night, people from the four temples in Shidieghuer gather together in Lajia temple, and we chant *mani* all night long. When cocks begin to crow, we pick up the palanquin from Lajia Village and set off towards the valley area. We don't wear shoes or hats. The *huala* chases us and drives us along the banks of the river, and we have to walk over the stones there.

## Account Four

Many years ago, *huala* sometimes went to deal with *nur* [dams]. If the weather was very dry one year, people thought that there must a *nur* somewhere. They say that a female immortal from heaven spends her pregnancy in a *nur*. She pulls the mountains together to make a lake, and then she lives in the water while she is pregnant. This is just a legend – nobody has ever seen such a thing.

It is easy to deal with a *nur* – you just make a channel to let the water out. So, if there's a drought one year, village leaders come together to discuss what to do. "Maybe, there is a *nur* somewhere," they'll say, "so let's invite a *huala* or Daoist tantrin." Then, they invite a *huala* to ask him if there is a *nur* somewhere or not, and if he says that there is a *nur*, then they ask him where the *nur* is. The *huala* usually just tells them the general direction.

Before they set off to the *nur*, a Daoist tantrin chants scriptures until the *huala* is possessed. The *huala* then pierces himself with metal skewers, and the Daoist gives him several talismanic bowls to tie on his body. He also gives the *huala* a protective charm to wear. The *huala* then brandishes a sword and leads all the villagers to the *nur* while the Daoist stays in the village. If one family doesn't go, then the village leaders fine them one sheep.

When villagers arrive at the *nur*, first, they implant crossed flags in the ground near the *nur*. Then, the *huala* tells the villagers where the evil things are in the lake, and instructs them to throw dead dogs or small bombs into the water. The *huala* always tries to go into the water, but villagers restrain him, and we just throw bombs and a dead dog into the water instead. If you throw a dead dog in the water, the water will become polluted and the evil will leave. A dead dog is the dirtiest thing in the world – that's what we usually say. If we want to insult someone, we say they are as dirty as a rotten dog. The bombs can frighten the evil away. Then, villagers dig a channel and the water flows out.

Whenever we go to deal with a *nur*, all the people from the seven villages in this area have to go. The Daoist tantrin provides some of them with bowls that he has empowered with his chanting. Then, villagers can throw them into the lake to help expel the evils. Meanwhile, all the villagers continually call out "Qiliao, zuliao!"<sup>14</sup> while this is done.

I have seen such things three times in my life. One was

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<sup>14</sup> Potanin translates this phrase as, "It is over, they have dispersed."

near the Zhaomuchuan Monastery. Another time was in Gamaka, and the other was in Wushi Valley, near Yindong Valley. Once, all Sanchuan people went to deal with a *nur* in Dazizhuang. I heard that that was a very big *nur*. As soon as they dug the channel and drained the *nur*, it began to rain and rain and rain. So, the *huala* became famous after that. But, after that old *huala* came back from Dazizhuang, his cow died. He had defeated the evil in the *nur*, but that evil got its revenge on him.

The last time we went to deal with a *nur* was in Wushi Valley. On our way back from the *nur*, Wushi villagers came to fight with us. They said that we hadn't polluted a *nur*, we'd polluted their holy lake that belonged to their Niangniang Ye. So, they tried to start a fight with us. We didn't have many people then, because Wushi is very far from here, and so on the way some people had turned back.

Several years ago, some people came here to pray for water. They were going to Mengda Lake. They just passed by our village, and they had bare feet. They wore hats like the ones that our Daoist tantrins wear. Lots of Muslims also pray for water. The imam leads the Muslims with bare feet. They chant their Muslims scriptures on the road. When Muslim people go to pray for water, they go to somewhere near Mengda Lake. One year, during a drought, *maniqi*<sup>15</sup> from Zhaomuchuan went to a place on the other side of the Yellow River and prayed for rain. All the *maniqi* chanted scriptures and wore wreaths made of willow branches.

### *Account Five*

Many years ago, when people went to pray for water or to deal with a *nur*, villagers had to ask the Niangniang Ye *huala* to dance. He would tell them where the *nur* was, and how to deal with that, but he never went with them, he just stayed in the village and didn't go to a monastery and temple.

The former Niangniang Ye *huala* often impaled himself with a spear during rituals. I heard old people saying that once they went to get water from the Yellow River and the Niangniang Ye *huala* ran into the Yellow River. Villagers should have tied a rope around him. Every time we go expel a *nur* or get water, *huala* will walk into the river or *nur*. Older people told us that that time the Niangniang Ye *huala* stuck the spear into himself. Villagers should have stopped him, but they didn't. When that

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<sup>15</sup> *Maniqi* are typically elder women who gather regularly to chant Buddhist scriptures in Chinese.

*huala* danced back to Gaishang, even Muslims were very surprised, and they knelt down on the ground and stuck out their tongues in surprise. Then, they took water from the Yellow River to Ghada Monastery. After he stopped dancing, he scolded all the people there. "Fuck all your mothers! " He said that because villagers hadn't controlled him when he was possessed, so he'd gone into the water while the spear was still in his abdomen. He kept the spear in for a very long time and had difficulty taking it out later.

Dealing with a *nur* is very different from getting water. If it is very windy in a drought year we think that there must be a *nur* somewhere. Whenever there are clouds in the sky, the wind blows them away. That means that there is a *nur* somewhere. When a *nur* occurs, an evil female evil has drawn together water to make a lake. The area around there becomes very dry and there won't be any rain. That female evil stays there to give birth. To deal with that, we throw a dog or *sasa*<sup>16</sup> into the water. We throw a dog into the *nur* and then we throw it in again if it runs out.

When we go to get water from Niangniang Lake, we pray to the deities, but if we go to get water from a *nur*, we just chase the female evil away. If the bank of the *nur* is not very high, we just dig a channel to let the water out. But usually the banks are very high, so we use dogs or *sasa* to pollute the *nur* and chase the evils away. Villagers ask a *huala* to dance to see where the *nur* is.

We call droughts and other big disasters *bershijia* or *wershijia*. They are very big disasters for many people, just like the disaster when religion was suppressed. 1993, for example, was a drought year. Villagers didn't plant any seeds in their fields. Because of the situation, the leader of the villages here advised villagers to get water from Niangniang Lake. All the villagers gathered in the temple on the chosen day. Then I was possessed and pierced my cheeks with metal skewers. Then I left the temple and lead the villagers to go to the lake.

The local leader chased students on the road and didn't let anyone turn back or rest. I walked up and down the line of people and asked them to walk quickly. If someone tried to leave, I went and beat him. All the monks from our Tibetan Buddhist monastery also came, playing their musical instruments.

When we arrived at the lake, I came out of trance. We killed a sheep and cooked it, and offered some of it to local

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<sup>16</sup> In Tibetan, *tshwa tshwa* – clay Buddhist icons stamped from a mold.

deities. That's called *popan*. Later, we ate the rest, but after we made the offering, the deity possessed me again and I went into the lake. After I danced three circles around the lake, my feet were burning with pain because the thick black mud on the floor of the lake had instantly sucked my shoes off my feet. The weather was very cold. It had been raining when we started from the temple, and so after I walked around the lake three times, I was so cold that my body was shaking. My clothes became very wet. It was very difficult, but I had to do it because I'm a *huala*.

To get water from the lake, we use my red headscarf and a bottle. First, we put the bottle on the scarf near the shore of the lake, and took a colorful string out of the mouth of the bottle. Then I dragged this string into the lake so that one end was in the bottle and one was in the lake. Usually, water then goes into the bottle. After I walked into the water with that colored string, villagers beat gongs and some experienced old men went to look at the bottle and check if there was water in it or not. When they shouted, "Water is coming!" I walked out of the lake and villagers covered the bottle with the scarf and held it over the mouth very tightly. One villager held the bottle, and then I chased all the people back to the village. At that time, I chased the villagers through the thorn bushes near the village monastery. After we arrived at our monastery we put that bottle on the table in front of the monastery shrines and the monks chanted scriptures for several days.

After the monks chanted for several days, we needed to return the water to the deities. When we get water from that lake, it's just as if we had kidnapped the Dragon King's children. We had to return that, because we just borrowed that water from the lake. So, after some monks chanted, someone took the bottle and poured the water into a lake or a spring. Anyone can do that, and a *huala* doesn't need to be present.

Sometimes, when we get water, the water escapes on the way back to the village. If the *huala* knows that the water has escaped, he will go to look for it. Once the water ran away when my villagers took water from the lake. The *huala* at that time discovered that and went to look for the water with all the villagers. Later, they found the water on a blade of grass. Actually, there was just a drop of dew there. Then, they took that drop of dew and put it into the bottle and took it back. I just heard this – I never had such an experience myself.

## Account Six

Whenever we have a drought, the monks in our monastery chant scriptures to bring rain. They chant for seven days, and at that time, I need to go into trance in the monastery. Although I'm a *huala*, when I dance in the monastery, I'm called *kurten*. In our temple, praying for water is the monks' duty, and as a *kurten* I should also go into trance when they chant.

As a *kurten*, I use a spear. One of my ancestors once went to pray for water from the Yellow River. He pierced his spear through his chest until it came out his back. Traditionally, the *kurten* should pierce himself with the spear in the monastery, and then he should take it out when he reaches the Dongyuan temple in Guanting, before he gets to the Yellow River. If the *kurten* does this, then the spear can't hurt him. But, when my ancestor was the *kurten*, they didn't let him take the spear out at Dongyuan temple, so when he went to the Yellow River to fetch water, he still had the spear in his chest. Some water entered his body through the hole, and the spear got a little rusty. Then after he came back home, he died soon after.

During the first year after I became a *huala* I went into trance near Niangniang Lake. That was a rainy day, because several days ago, people from Zhaomuchuan had come to our Niangniang Lake to pray for water. It had been a very dry year. After people from Zhaomuchuan went back to their villages, it started to rain, on the fourth day of the fifth lunar month. That morning, a Muslim guy from Guanting came to visit my home. I told him, "Please go home soon. It's going to rain." I made a divination, and it told me it was going to rain. But that Muslim guy said, "Are you kidding me? Take a look at the sky, there's no way it's going to rain." But then, at noon, it started to rain. After a short while, the rain stopped. I did another divination, and the results weren't good – I could tell that my deity was angry. Later, I heard that people from Zhaomuchuan had thrown some dirty things into the lake. They hadn't gone to our Niangniang Lake to pray for water – they'd gone there to destroy a *nur!* They thought our Niangniang Lake was a *nur!* The people from Zhaomuchuan had made Niangniang Lake dirty, and so Niangniang Ye was very angry.

The next day was the festival of Wuyue Dangwu. All the monks from our monastery went up to Niangniang Lake, and villagers went with them, bringing a sheep. The monks made a big incense offering. The old *huala* from Wanzi Village also came up to Niangniang Lake with us. As soon as we arrived there, the Wanzi *huala* went into trance, and then I also went into trance

not long after, and we danced together. The Wanzi *huala* dug out all the bowls that the Zhaomuchuan people had buried around Niangniang Lake. Then, he jumped into the lake and knelt down in the water. Villagers didn't understand why he had jumped into the lake and knelt down in the water like that. Then I pointed at villagers with my sword and told them, "Please dig in front of the old *huala*." When villagers dug there, they found a bowl in front of him. Then the Wanzi *huala* jumped out of the lake, and he and I both came out of trance.

Next, villagers cooked mutton. When the meat in the pot was cooked, many bubbles came out of the water in Niangniang Lake – it looked just like a flower. Villagers didn't know what was happening, so they asked the Wanzi *huala* to go into trance again. So he went into trance, and when they asked the Wanzi *huala* what was going on, he answered, "No rain this year. People here don't believe in deities deeply enough, so the deities are going to punish them." Then, I went into trance, and villagers asked me what was happening, and I answered, "It will rain soon. Heaven will give you gentle wind and rains." Two *huala* gave villagers two different answers.

On the way back home, one villager asked me, "You two *huala* gave us two different answers, so which one should we listen to? The Wanzi *huala* said there would be no rain this year, but you said it would rain soon. It's raining fire now, so it seems impossible that we will get rain any time soon. So, why'd you say that?" I answered him, "I don't know what I said when I was possessed. If I really said that it will rain, then please go home and have a good sleep – it will rain." At about eleven o'clock that night I went to the monastery to watch TV. The night sky was full of bright stars. I stayed in the monastery that night, and early that morning, I heard the sound of rain. Heaven gave us very heavy rain, which lasted for four or five days. So, all the people around here were saved. It was very late in the season to plant wheat, so instead we planted millet. We didn't have delicious wheat flour to eat that year, but we had something to eat.

#### WEATHER MANAGEMENT IN NORTH CHINA AND INNER ASIA

The first thing to note about the rituals described here is that, as pointed out by Molnár (1994) in his exhaustive comparative study of 'weather magic' in Inner Asia, they do not bear any similarity to the many weather management rituals that are performed by Turkic and Mongolic peoples throughout the region, which typically involve the

use of 'rain-stones', often bezoars. However, Molnár's explanation that practices in Sanchuan can be explained by "the influence of Chinese popular beliefs ... as well as the influence of Buddhism" needs some clarification. Following, I attempt to disentangle some of the 'traditions of knowledge' (Barth 1993) elided by the category 'Chinese popular beliefs', and in doing so, aim to avoid the associations this term makes between cultural practice and ethnic identity, as well as the problematic suggestions of sinicization that it carries (see Brown 2001 and Rawski 1996). I also conclude this comparative section with a brief look at Tibetan traditions of knowledge concerned with water and weather management and their relationship to practices in Sanchuan. In engaging with the literature here, it is not my intention to provide an exhaustive review of all available literature on weather management in North China and Inner Asia, but rather to flag key sources that signpost major issues in contextualizing practices in Sanchuan.

In unpacking the problematic category of 'Chinese popular beliefs', a distinction can be made between popular beliefs in north and south China (Overmyer 2009). Although this distinction does not represent a sharp delineation between two entirely distinct traditions of knowledge, it does represent a pattern of difference that is consistent with significant regional identities (Friedman 2002), and with broader cultural patterns beyond 'religion' (Cohen 2005, Jones 2010).

The rain-beckoning rituals held in Sanchuan are broadly similar to those described by Overmyer (2009:20) as typical of north China practices:

...in Changli County in Hebei ... we are told that villagers put an image of the Dragon King in a basket and took it around to nearby villages. In front of each house in each village the participants used [sprinkled?] water with a willow branch, and spread out a piece of yellow paper with the characters on it, "The position [=tablet] of the Dragon King of the Four Seas, Five Lakes, Eight Rivers and Nine Streams" [in sum, a lord of all the waters]. They offered burning incense in front of this. Along the road, those who saw this kneeled and bowed calling out, "May it rain!" Many people accompanied this procession, barefooted and wearing headdresses made of willow branches. This

procession was welcomed in all the villages it passed through, then it returned to where it had begun. At night people gathered at the Dragon King temple to pray.

Several significant similarities exist between this account and those above. First is the Dragon King deity as a source of efficacy, which ultimately also includes the capacity to bestow rain (see also Chau 2006). Second is the element of procession, which, as the accounts above demonstrate, often involves a significant element of hospitality on behalf of communities that are encountered along the way. Another similarity between this account and those above, is that the villagers taking part in the procession go barefoot and wear headdresses of willow branches, something I return to below. Another account, from Du Bois (2005:45-46) highlights the importance of community involvement in north China's local religion, a feature also shared by Sanchuan's rain-beckoning rituals:

The Prayer for Rain ceremony ... can last from one to three days, addresses the most basic need of the dry farming regions of North China. Rainfall being a universal necessity, and, moreover, one that generally does not distinguish among individual households, Prayers for Rain are the epitome of a common concern and a common good. Ethnographic accounts from various locations in Republican North China suggest that village Prayers for Rain were often not only a collective effort, but also a recreation of the village in ritual form. In most cases, the ritual began with a formal procession around the village, which delineated the boundaries of the community. According to village leaders in Shajiang and Houxiazhai villages (in northern Hebei and northern Shandong, respectively), one adult male from each household would participate in the procession, although ordinary villagers questioned on the topic were less emphatic about the universality of this custom. In Wudian Village, near Beijing, the procession stopped in front of each household so that the residents could burn incense to the statue of Guandi carried at its head. In the large village of Lengshuigou, near Jilin, nearly a quarter of the 400 household participated in the prayer, each in a specific ritual capacity. Even those who did not perform a ritual function maintained the purity of the sacrifice by abstaining from certain foods (such as meat and onions) and sexual intercourse during the three days of the ceremony.

As in the cases described here by Du Bois, broad participation from the community is an important feature of the rain-beckoning rituals of Sanchuan.

Despite this similarity between the rain-beckoning rituals of Sanchuan and those of north China's popular religion more generally, it is also important to discuss some other practices which might also be called 'popular Chinese beliefs' with which Sanchuan rituals show less overlap, namely, popular Daoism and vernacular-imperial practices.

As with popular religion, Jones (2010) makes a distinction between northern and southern regional forms in his study of Daoism and folk Daoist practices. In this book, he makes several mentions of 'rain rituals' and 'rain ceremonies' (*qiyu*, *qiuyu*), but provides few details (see also Chau 2006). He states that the rituals draw on texts present in both Daoist and Buddhist scriptural traditions, and also states that Daoists, Buddhists, and Christians in North China all conduct rain rituals. He mentions a 'rain-thanksgiving' (*xieyu*) ritual performed in Xinzhou that required the participation of Buddhist and Daoist practitioners, and also mentions the widespread presence of *shuihui* – water assemblies, probably similar to *paitou* – across northern China. Finally, Jones mentions 'fetching water' (*quyu*) rites, performed in two different ritual contexts. In the context of a funeral ritual that Jones observed, water was fetched in order to be offered to the deceased, presumably within a logic whereby descendants continue their filial obligations to their ancestors by continuing to feed them after death. In another instance, Jones describes a fetching water rite being conducted at a temple fair, and here the rite seems related to the rain-beckoning rituals of Sanchuan: a procession of villagers visits a well, at which they fill a vase with water before conveying it to the temple. Both 'fetching water' rites require the participation of a *yinyang*, a lay Daoist practitioner, though it is unclear to what extent these practitioners are similar to or different from the Daoists tantrins of Sanchuan, also called *yinyang*.

Imperial rain-beckoning and drought-breaking have been dealt with by Snyder-Reinke (2009) and Elvin (1998, 2006). This form of weather control is broadly coherent with a Confucian imperial cosmology that places the emperor at the center of a moral

order which necessitated that he maintain the cosmos in a state of equilibrium by 'nourishing the people' (*yangmin*), and 'controlling the waters' (*zhishui*) (Elvin 1998, Edgerton-Tarpley 2014). Failure of the emperor to maintain righteous moral conduct resulted in Heaven's displeasure, including inclement weather, and even natural disasters, for the empire. The emperor's responsibility to nourish the people and control the waters, therefore, was first and foremost a duty to uphold, exemplify, and defend Confucian moral values. He was also responsible for conducting annual agricultural rites to secure the well-being of all residents of the empire.

In the same way that the emperor's moral conduct was responsible for the well-being of the empire, local magistrates were responsible for the residents of their jurisdiction. Local magistrates used a variety of methods to beckon rain and break droughts, some of which included the punishment of deities by, for example, exposing their statue to the sun until rain fell (see Feuchtwang 2001:77, Snyder-Reinke 2009). We find echoes of such strategies in Sanchuan, as in the following account:

In Hawangjia temple, the deity's statue used to be made of jade. During a drought one year, people from Xing'er found a *nur* and became very angry at their deity. They said, "You are the deity in this village, but you let that evil being make a *nur* near your temple!" Then, they threw that jade deity into the *nur*.

Another account describes an annual ritual, during which the resident Dragon King is punished by a local monk-official (Nuoyan) as part of a dramatic performance:

The Nuoyan asks, "Was there not enough rain this year? Didn't the Dragon King give enough water?" and the Nuoyan says, "Please bring the Dragon King here and beat him." There is a very big stone out of which a spring flows. They tie the stone with ropes and beat it.

Such instances of punishing deities for failing to fulfill their duty are examples of what I call vernacular-imperial practices – practices that emerged in the complex cultural exchange between imperial state elites and the common people.

In addition to imperial practices that sought to punish deities for failing to fulfill their duty to the people, another significant category of imperial weather management centered on the magistrate rather than the deity. Such practices included the magistrate making barefoot processions to temples, exposing himself in the sun until rain fell, writing petitions to the deities in his own blood, and even committing suicide by self-immolation. As Snyder-Reinke (2009) documents, the purpose of such rituals was to demonstrate the magistrate's sincerity, and thus virtue, to Heaven, thus bringing about a rebalancing of the disordered cosmos. The following account shows that some aspect of this imperial sincerity is found in the Sanchuan rain-beckoning rituals:

Here, we carry our deity to Mengda Lake in Xunhua to pray for water. Villagers take off their shoes and walk there barefoot. If we went there with a cigarette in our mouth, wearing leather shoes, strolling comfortably, I don't think it would work – we wouldn't be able to get water.

Looking at this broader, comparative context, it therefore seems that weather management practices in Sanchuan were similar to the rituals practiced as part of a distinctly North China variety of popular religion, especially the rain-beckoning rituals: the veneration of Dragon King deities, the participatory communal processions, and the use of willow-branches all seem to confirm this. I also noted, however, that weather management techniques in Sanchuan draw on popular Daoist traditions of knowledge, as evidenced by the participation of Daoist practitioners and the metaphor of 'fetching' water. Elements of vernacular-imperial traditions of knowledge can also be seen in the instances of punitive reprisal against deities for failing to meet their obligations, and in participants' concern to express their Confucian sincerity.

This examination of the comparative literature, however, only confirms the apparent uniqueness of the drought-breaking rituals practiced in Sanchuan, which focused on expelling evil beings from *nur*, as no parallels exist in the literature on local religion or popular Daoism in North China, or writing on imperial weather management. The following brief examination of the literature on Tibetan weather

management techniques only serves to confirm the uniqueness of Sanchuan's drought-breaking rituals. Unlike in the preceding discussion, I do not distinguish between distinct traditions of knowledge in the Tibetan case (though this might profitably be done).

Like the Confucian imperial tradition, Tibetan conceptions of the weather included a moral aspect: transgressions among people, or by people against various spirits or deities, cause bad weather, be it hail, drought, or other calamities (Huber and Pedersen 1997). Maintaining appropriate weather, therefore, was primarily a matter of maintaining moral conduct among people, and not transgressing the norms that structured interactions with spirits and deities. Bad weather, however, could also be caused by malevolent spirits, or created by religious practitioners (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993, Waley-Cohen 2006). Various religious specialists could deflect, disperse, and even destroy bad weather. Huber and Pedersen (1997) cite a case of a lama using meditative techniques to disperse a storm. Rdo rje don 'grub (2012) describes the deflection of rain and hail by Buddhist tantrins (*dpon*, *sngags pa*) in northeast Tibet (Amdo) and Sihlé (2009) describes hail prevention as part of Bon and Buddhist tantric practice in Nyemo, southwest of Lhasa. Snying bo rgyal and Rino (2009) describe the participation of *lha pa*, deity mediums similar to Sanchuan *huala*, in a rain-beckoning ritual. Throughout the ten days of the ritual, three *lha pa* camped by a spring, and were periodically possessed by local patron deities, whose divine efficacy brought the needed rain. Brief though this survey is, it suggests that in Tibetan contexts, weather was managed by the people at large through the maintenance of moral conduct and correct social relations with spirits and deities. Weather could also be managed through tantric measures by religious practitioners, or by the divine intervention of patron deities. Weather management in Sanchuan, by contrast, seems to have lacked the underlying moral logic, and relied much more on ritual intervention by the community members working together with ritual practitioners. This, once again, confirms the affinities of practices in Sanchuan with the traditions of knowledge described above, and highlights the uniqueness of the drought-breaking rituals.

## CONCLUSION

We may return now to the questions posed at the start of this article regarding cultural diversity, ethnic boundaries, and traditions of knowledge. Is Barth's critique of 'Herderian common sense' justified in this instance? And if so, does his concept of 'traditions of knowledge' offer a viable framework for understanding observed patterns of cultural diversity? What other factors might structure local cultural diversity?

The materials presented here do indeed support Barth's (1969) assertion that ethnic boundaries and cultural difference are not necessarily related. Despite the fact that all Tu populations constitute a single *minzu*, and are therefore supposed to share a common culture, weather management rituals in Sanchuan bear almost no resemblance to anything found amongst other Monguor populations. Furthermore, practices in Sanchuan align closely with those found among another of China's *minzu*, the majority Han, further complicating any simple correlation between ethnicity and culture. These conclusions also confirm what has been described in other publications regarding the internal diversity and complex cultural affiliations of the Monguor (Roche 2014, Roche and Stuart 2015, Janhunen 2006), not to mention what we know more broadly about *minzu* as categories that typically contain and conceal diversity rather than represent it (Mullaney 2011).

Using traditions of knowledge as a framework seems to provide a more fruitful approach to understanding cultural diversity in the present case. I have shown how Sanchuan's rain-beckoning rituals bear many similarities to other weather management practices in the traditions of North China's popular religion and popular Daoism, as well as the Confucian-inspired vernacular-imperial practice. Therefore, if we wish to account for why weather management practices in Sanchuan are the way they are, we can fruitfully do so by looking at traditions of knowledge rather than ethnic groups. Furthermore, if we wish to account for the diversity of practices among the Monguor, we can explain this by the unequal influence of differing traditions of knowledge on different

populations. If weather management practices among Monguor outside of Sanchuan are different, it is because they are influenced by different traditions of knowledge – not by different ethnic groups.

Examining diversity in terms of traditions of knowledge can explain patterns of similarity between practices in Sanchuan and elsewhere in the region. However, perhaps what is most striking about the rituals described above is the diversity *within* Sanchuan. Although practices are broadly similar within the categories of rain-beckoning and drought-breaking rituals, there is enormous diversity within those categories, such that no two communities practice the rituals in the same way. In order to explain this, we must resort to Johnson's (2009:333) concept of 'village ritual autarky', a form of communal independence that existed in the absence of any "authority with the power to regulate local ritual activity," beyond the village level, and meant that "in the realm of ritual ... villages were left alone." Johnson (2009:337) describes such communities as "independent, creative, [and] self-conscious." In Sanchuan, communal autarky existed insofar as the *paitou* in each village were responsible for organizing communal rituals, with no supervision from any external authority. This has led to the granular diversification of the broad patterns formed by the traditions of knowledge that are the source of the ritual practices.

Traditions of knowledge and communal ritual autarky, then, explain a lot about patterns of similarity and difference when it comes to the rain-beckoning rituals. However, the drought-breaking rituals – those acts of ritual dam-busting – bear no similarity to anything in any of the traditions of knowledge reported in the literature. We should concede, therefore, that these practices are possibly unique to Sanchuan. This means that, in addition to traditions of knowledge and communal autarky, we should add another factor to the elements which shape cultural diversity – that of locality, of territorial or regional units, i.e., localized, supracommunal formations, as suggested by Wimmer (2013). This 'localized' approach is one that Kevin Stuart has himself long-advocated.

In conclusion then, this study has corroborated Barth's suggestion that ethnic boundaries do not necessarily indicate anything meaningful about cultural diversity and similarity. In the

present case, traditions of knowledge have provided a much more suitable framework for explaining observed patterns. However, the full extent of diversity could not be explained solely by looking at traditions of knowledge, and it was necessary to also recognize the impact of locality and community. Returning to the general debate around the management of cultural diversity through multiculturalist ideology discussed in the introduction, I will conclude by considering what the practical implications of such findings might be. Although much further study would be needed to confirm the general pattern, the findings in this paper suggest that a focus on ethnic groups is insufficient for understanding and managing diversity. Rather, more complex and nuanced strategies that focus, at the least, on the effects of multiple traditions of knowledge and how they intersect with community and locality would be better suited to managing cultural diversity in its fullest extent.

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